

GOOD Vibrations



Learn to meditate
like a monk at
The Monroe Institute

BY KATY KOONTZ

Meditation has never been easy for me. I tend to live most of my mental life in the fast lane. Don't get me wrong: I can go deep, but getting there is challenging. So when I heard about The Monroe Institute (TMI) in Faber, Virginia—a nonprofit research and education organization that pioneered using sound technology to help people achieve deep states of meditation—I was instantly intrigued.

That's how I found myself lying on a mattress in a quite comfy but darkened cubbyhole, headphones in place, eyes closed, and psyched to experience what Monroe Institute executive director Nancy McMoneagle calls "greater, expanded states of awareness that aren't normally available to us in our regular waking state."

I'd come to TMI, located on 800 acres in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, along with 23 others eager to take the weeklong beginner's program, called the Gateway Voyage. Our group, like most, was an interesting mix.

"You might have a Catholic priest, a corporate executive, a student, an engineer, a lawyer, a mother of young kids—participants come from all walks of life," McMoneagle notes.

Many from my group had traveled across the country, and a few even across the Atlantic, to get here. The youngest was a college student, and the oldest was a woman in her 80s. But we had one thing in common—we were all curious about consciousness.

During the orientation on the first evening, the trainers did the unthinkable: They collected our watches. I felt disoriented not being able to tell time—which was exactly the intention.

"It's amazing what people experience by having to give up time, because it's such a huge reference point for us in our physical-matter reality," McMoneagle explains. "We also discourage use of cell phones except during the lunch break so people can totally focus within instead of splitting their attention. After all, Gateway is about breaking old patterns and allowing for new possibilities."

I can appreciate the intent. Part of my struggle to go deep comes from being more left-brain dominant (all logic, words, and details) than right-brained (more intuitive and artistic). Anything that puts my left-brained orientation on hold gives my right brain some much-needed breathing room.

The new possibilities Gateway Voyage offers don't involve cleaving to any dogma. "We don't promote any religious beliefs or set spiritual practices," McMoneagle assures. "The only tenet we ask people to consider is that they are more than their physical bodies."

We Got the Beats

That was a lesson TMI founder Bob Monroe discovered quite by accident in 1958. A radio station owner and program producer, Monroe started tinkering with using sound technology for sleep learning and had a startling occurrence—a phenomenon known as an out-of-body

experience (OBE). He became acutely aware of his consciousness existing outside his physical body, viewing his sleeping physical form in bed below. Fearing he might be going crazy, he saw a doctor, who pronounced him healthy and suggested he not work quite so hard.

Monroe did exactly the opposite, assembling a team of researchers who discovered not only that the borderline

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sleep state (mind awake and alert, but body asleep) is roughly equivalent to deep states of meditation, but also that these states can be encouraged by using certain sound frequencies. Thus began decades of research on using sound technology to achieve various states of altered consciousness. Several consciousness researchers over the years joined in the effort, including parapsychologist Charles Tart, Ph.D., remote viewing expert Russell Targ, psychologist and holotropic breathwork developer Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D., astronaut and founder of the Institute of Noetic Sciences Edgar Mitchell, Sc.D., and death and dying expert Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D.

The frequencies Monroe worked with were too low for the human ear to hear, so he replicated them using a phenomenon called *binaural beats*—the result of headphones delivering a slightly different frequency in each ear. To reconcile these differing frequencies, the brain's right and the left hemispheres work in unison, producing an electrical signal that acts as though the brain can "hear" a third frequency—the difference between the other two. So for example, by putting a tone of 104 Hz into one ear and a tone of 100 Hz into the other, the brain would respond by sensing a vibration of 4 Hz, well below the 50 Hz threshold of what the human ear can perceive. The resulting coherent brain signals appear more synchronized—each hemisphere mirroring the brainwaves of the other.

Monroe found that different binaural frequencies produced different effects, such as improving focus, inducing restful sleep, invoking relaxation, and encouraging physical healing—in addition to their benefits in achieving deeper states of meditation. He

patented this method, which he later named *Hemi-Sync*: a mixture of several different binaural beats along with guided relaxation, breathing, and visualization exercises.

After two decades of research, Monroe founded TMI in 1974, guided by a 20-member board of advisors that included engineers, biochemists, physicists, physicians, educators, and psychologists. The institute has been offering an ever-expanding variety of programs—some weeklong, like Gateway Voyage, and some lasting only a weekend—ever since, even though Monroe himself died in 1995.

TMI's sister company, Monroe Products, sells Hemi-Sync music and guided meditation CDs embedded with specific binaural beat frequencies for people to use at home for a variety of purposes. They address reducing anxiety, lifting depression, preventing insomnia, managing

pain, improving self-esteem, enhancing concentration, encouraging creativity, and even reaching states of expanded awareness and altered states of consciousness. Some products are sets of several recordings designed for those progressing through pregnancy, surgery, stroke recovery, cancer therapy, and even terminal illnesses. Some teach skills, such as lucid dreaming.

Hemi-Sync does not contain subliminal messages, nor does it hypnotize people, although it is somewhat similar to self-hypnosis. The listener remains in total control at all times. Hemi-Sync doesn't take over brain waves, forcing

an outcome against a person's will; it merely assists the listener in concentrating their focus on a desired effect.

More recently, TMI's researchers developed a new audio technology that's equally adept at encouraging expanded states of awareness; it's used in several programs (although not in Gateway Voyage). Dubbed SAM (an acronym for "spatial angle modulation"), it involves listening to arcs of sound (such as a train would make as

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it moves from one direction past where you are standing and on to the opposite direction) moving back and forth. The mix of the various arcs for each SAM meditation differ not only in the actual frequency of the sound, but also in the direction the sound comes from, the distance the sound moves, the speed it moves, and where the starting point of the sound is within the range of its arc.

Recognizing Guidance

During the Gateway Voyage program, we listened to about five or six recorded meditations each day. While some participants familiar with Monroe's OBE adventures come here to have their own such experience (as a handful in my first group did), most come to learn how to tune out the static in their heads and more easily connect with inner guidance. That's the true goal of Gateway.

“Most participants want to understand why they’re here, to sense more meaning in their lives, to encourage more creativity, and to be able to meditate deeply,” McMoneagle notes. “A lot of experienced meditators who took years to get to where they are come to Gateway only to see people around them getting there in a day and a half!”

Still, the trainers discouraged us from having any specific expectations, since that can often block the very experiences we hope to have. Instead of putting effort into trying to have a prescribed experience, they suggested we relax and allow our guidance to find us. The exercises also trained us to recognize new ways that guidance naturally occurs for each of us—not only during meditations, but at other times, as well. Some participants had classic visions that seemed very real, while guidance for most of us was much more subtle, such as suddenly seeing something from a new, expanded perspective after previously feeling stuck.

As for me, I was able to recognize kinesthetic guidance via physical sensations in ways I’d never fully appreciated before. For example, during one meditation, my toes felt inexplicable cold, even though I’m extremely sensitive to heat and rarely feel chilled. Exploring that sensation within the meditation, I asked myself what causes cold toes, and then waited for an answer. I got an impression of myself standing on the edge of a cliff with my toes hanging off the lip.

What was significant about that image was that I was standing—I wasn’t jumping off the side. And then I understood something I’d been pushing out of my conscious awareness. I’d been holding back about something I thought I wanted to do, convincing myself I was willing to take a leap of faith, but then wondering why nothing was happening. Once I realized I’d not been as willing as I thought I was and had also been unconsciously judging myself for my hesitation, I was able to give myself permission to step back from the edge and make a different choice. I felt liberated—it was exhilarating!

My week was filled with several similar experiences, and by the end of the program I had a much better handle not only on how to tune out the static in my mind, but also on what my unique signature of guidance feels like. For me, I discovered, TMI stood for “total meditation indulgence.” 🌱

For information on The Monroe Institute’s programs, visit www.monroeinstitute.org. For information on Hemi-Sync products, visit www.hemi-sync.com.



Monroe Institute founder Bob Monroe (center) and two views of Nancy Penn Center, one of TMI’s residential facilities.